02 January 2004

U.S. Investigators Continue Work on Mad Cow Case
Contamination likely occurred on cow's birth farm, USDA believes

A U.S. dairy cow infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy, known as BSE or mad cow disease, most likely contracted the disease from contaminated feed at her birth farm, believed to have been in Canada, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) says.

During a January 2 briefing for reporters, USDA Chief Veterinarian Ron DeHaven said that DNA testing is being conducted in the United States and Canada to confirm the origin of the cow. The USDA and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) expect to have the test results the week of January 5, DeHaven said.

DeHaven explained that establishing the infected cow's birth farm is important so that scientists can identify other animals that might have ingested the same feed. Most cases of BSE are believed to occur when cattle ingest feed containing nerve or spinal cord tissue from an infected animal.

USDA officials believe the infected cow was born in Canada in April 1997, months before Canada and the United States banned the use of cattle feed containing protein supplements derived from the remains of cattle or other ruminants. The USDA believes the cow was one of 82 animals from the same dairy herd that were exported to the United States in 2001.

"It's likely that this index cow that is positive became infected while she was on [the birth farm] premises," DeHaven said. "At that point it will be critical to determine what other animals ... would have been born about the same time and exposed to the same feed."

DeHaven also said the USDA will not make a final decision on the United States' proposed resumption of live cattle imports from Canada without taking into account the "new situation" resulting from the BSE case in the United States. A public comment period on the resumption is due to close on January 5.

"I think one thing [that] would be for certain is that we would not make any determination in terms of a final rule without giving all due consideration to the new situation coming to light because of the find of this positive cow in the state of Washington," DeHaven said.

The United States banned cattle imports from Canada following Canada's discovery of its own BSE case in May 2003.

Following is the transcript of USDA's January 2 briefing:

(begin transcript)

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Transcript of Technical Briefing and Webcast with U.S. Government Officials on BSE Situation
January 2, 2004

MR. ED CURLETT: I'd like to welcome everybody to the BSE situation update for today. Today we'll have Dr. Ron DeHaven, the chief veterinary officer for USDA, making a statement. We also have with us, from the Food and Drug Administration, Dr. Stephen Sundlof, to answer questions as needed. And we also have with us Dr. Daniel Engeljohn with the Food Safety and Inspection Service. Again, because of the number of people on the call, particularly the audio bridge, we ask that you keep your questions just to one. And with that, I'll turn it over to Dr. DeHaven.

Thank you, sir.

DR. RON DEHAVEN (USDA): Thank you, Ed. And happy New Year to all of you, and thanks again for joining us.

Well, we did take the day off yesterday from media briefings. Our epidemiological work, of course, did continue. I'm going to provide you the latest information on that as well as some more information about how we are modifying our surveillance program.

First as to the epidemiological investigation, we have now confirmed that 81 of the 82 animals listed on the Canadian health certificate--and that would include the positive animal--entered the United States through the Oroville, Washington port on September 4, 2001. One of those 82 has now been confirmed on the ground at a Mattawa dairy facility operation which is now under state hold order. An inventory of that facility to look for possible additional Canadian animals is continuing, though we don't necessarily expect to find any. And in fact that has been delayed because of bad weather conditions in Mattawa today.

Just to recap where we are in tracing those 82 animals, we now have 11 of them definitively accounted for. One is the indexed positive cow; 9 are those known to be in the indexed herd; one is the animal that I mentioned on the Mattawa dairy operation. But we believe that one may still be in Canada. The whereabouts of the remaining 70 animals is still yet to be confirmed but, again, we have good leads on those, and we will keep you posted on that information as we gather it.

I want to reiterate that our interest in finding these cows is not because BSE can spread from cow to cow but because it's possible that they may have shared a common feed source when they were young, and therefore potentially would have had a common exposure. I think it's important to note, however, that even at the height of the outbreak of the disease in the United Kingdom it was uncommon to have more than just one or two animals in a herd found to be positive.

Also to clarify, we currently have three facilities under state hold orders, as our epidemiological investigation continues. The first is the index herd, that herd from which the positive cow departed immediately before slaughter. The second being a nearby facility that has the indexed cow recently born bull calf, and the third being that dairy operation in Mattawa.

We expect to have our DNA results from the indexed cow by sometime next week, and certainly we will share that information with you after we receive it and have an opportunity to analyze it.

Of course the Canadian laboratory is also running the DNA tests in their laboratory, and we are continuing to work very closely as we work--do our epidemiological work. Indeed, two Canadian epidemiologists are on the ground with us in the United States, and likewise USDA epidemiologists are in Canada.

This work would not be going nearly as well as it has been if we didn't have that close cooperation and partnership. So, again, our many thanks to our Canadian colleagues.

With regard to our surveillance program, given the secretary's announcement to prohibit nonambulatory or downer animals from going into slaughter establishments, a number of you have asked what the means will be in terms of capturing that population in terms of our surveillance program.

As we have discussed previously, we have tested 20,000 animals a year for the past two years, and approximately three-fourths of those animals were nonambulatory animals at slaughter.

Because this particular population of animals will no longer be coming to slaughter plants and no longer be going into the human food chain, we are working with industry representatives to reposition our efforts to collect those samples on the farm, at rendering facilities, and the so-called ‘three-D'--downed, dead, diseased animals--and those plants where those meat products are harvested for animal food and other nonedible purposes.

Of course, some number of those animals will arrive at slaughter and will become nonambulatory at slaughter. We'll continue to work to focus some of our efforts at collecting samples from those animals.

We are certainly committed, and the industry has shown a shared commitment to ensuring that we continue to have a very robust surveillance program for BSE in the United States. We will be working very closely with the rendering and other animal disposal industries as well as other government agencies in the days and weeks to come to ensure that we continue to have access to this particular population of animals which we consider to be those at the highest risk for BSE.

Indeed, on Wednesday of this week we had separate meetings with representatives from the dairy, the feed, and the rendering industries. Today we are hosting an interagency meeting--all-day meeting--at our facility in Riverdale, Maryland. And on Monday there will be an interagency and industry representative meeting to continue to develop our surveillance program.

As we talk about surveillance, and indeed a lot of emphasis is going on modifying our surveillance system to be consistent with the Secretary's announcements, I want to point out that testing in and of itself does not make food any safer. Rather, surveillance testing tells us if, number one, a disease is present and, if it is, what is the prevalence of the disease. The most important food safety measures, the ones that make our U.S. beef safe as it relates to BSE, is removal of the specified risk materials from human food and the AMR requirements. And those are exactly the announcements the Secretary made earlier this week.

Even those actions were taken out of an abundance of caution knowing that we do have, if at all, a very low prevalence of the disease in North America or in the U.S.

With that, since my colleagues from FSIS and FDA have no update announcement to give, let's go to the questions.

And Ed, we can start with the telephone bridge? Okay. So, Operator, the first question from the telephone bridge, please.

OPERATOR: Your first question comes from Harry Siemans. Please state your company name.

HARRY SIEMANS: Manitoba Cooperator. Farm Watch, Manitoba, Canada.

Just a question on when you get the confirmations as to where these cattle are actually from, what exactly will take place at that point?

DR. DEHAVEN: Knowing the birth herd is particularly important, because we know this disease has an incubation period typically of three to five years or sometimes even longer than that. So it's likely that this indexed cow that is positive became infected while she was on that premises. At that point it will be critical to determine what other animals that would have been birth cohorts of this positive animal--in other words, animals that would have been born about the same time and exposed to the same feed--where are those particular animals?

Another part of the investigation then would lead back to the feed chain. Where did--assuming that the animal became infected from consuming contaminated feed—where did that feed come from? What are the potential sources?

It's particularly important to point out that we now feel that this animal was 6 to 6 1/2 years old. The animal that was found to be positive in Canada in May was of the same approximate age, which makes them both born before the feed ban went in place--either in Canada and the U.S., which would suggest that would be the likely source of infection and also suggests the two animals that we have found were both born before the feed ban--to suggest that the feed ban in both Canada and the U.S. has been effective.

Steve, do you have anything to add to that?

DR. STEPHEN SUNDLOF (FDA): No.

All right. Next question, Operator?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Seth Borenstein. Please state your company name.

SETH BORENSTEIN: Yes. This is Seth Borenstein with Knight Ridder Newspapers.

Forgive me. I'm trying to understand a bit the Mattawa dairy operations. You said there is a cow that was part of the 82 that is down now, and do I understand that right? And are you testing it for BSE or am I misunderstanding that whole thing?

DR. DEHAVEN: I think you're misunderstanding, so I appreciate the question so I can clarify. We have located one of the 82 animals that was listed on the original health certificate at a dairy operation in Mattawa, Washington. She is still alive, still on the premise. Whether or not she will be sacrificed for testing or not is yet to be determined. But again, since this is not a contagious disease, not a disease that's spread by just casual direct contact between animals, there's no concern about her spreading the disease to other animals. But she is under hold order and won't be going anywhere until we determine the exact disposition on that particular animal. So she is alive and well on that facility, and she is under a state hold order at this point.

Next question, Operator?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Sandy Dowton. Please state your company name.

SANDY DOWTON: This is Sandy Dowton at the Seattle Times.

Can you tell us a little bit more about the DNA testing that you're doing? You're testing samples from the indexed cow, and what are you comparing them against?

DR. DEHAVEN: The DNA testing is an attempt through comparing DNA from multiple sources as to whether or not we in fact have traced the animal back to the appropriate source. Some of the samples that are being tested would include most notably--and the two most important samples that we have--would be tissue from the brain of the positive cow. So we've done DNA--or the laboratories will be doing DNA--extraction from that brain tissue from the positive animal, and then comparing it to DNA samples obtained from semen of what is thought to be the sire of this positive cow.

We were able to obtain through the breeding company samples of the semen that came from the same bull that, by the records in Canada, would suggest that they were the sire of this positive animal. We also have progeny, offspring from the positive cow in the U.S., so we have samples there to compare back to the sire. We have semen samples from the sire of some of those progeny. So there's a multitude of samples, but the most important ones would be the semen from what we think is the sire of this animal and the animal herself.

I would point out too that, while the DNA testing may enable us to make a definitive determination it's just one piece of information, and there's always opportunity for error. And I would just point out one possible opportunity for error, and I don't know this to be the case or not, and that would be, for example, it's not uncommon for dairy animals to be bred through artificial insemination, which apparently was the case in this situation.

But it's also common practice on dairy farms to provide what is referred to as ‘clean-up bulls'. In other words, bulls that would breed naturally with cows that may not have become impregnated through artificial insemination. So while we know that artificial insemination was the practice on what we think to be the most likely birth herd in Canada, there's always the possibility that something else could have happened that we may not know about, and the example I gave is just one example of many.

So while we hope that we are going to be able through that DNA testing to make a definitive determination, there's many variables that might get thrown into the mix and

come this time next week we may have some conflicting results. I don't have any reason at this point to suggest that or to think that, but I think it's only prudent to throw that out as a possibility.

One last question from the telephone bridge, Operator.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Tom Moore. Please state your company name.

TOM MOORE: Hi. Tom Moore from Capital Press.

This is for Dr. Engeljohn. I'm still trying to put the total quantity of meat together in the recall. I know what you recalled from Verns. But I'm wondering about the mixing that went on down the line. How much in total pounds is the recall involved in Willamette and in Interstate?

DR. ENGELJOHN (USDA): This is Dr. Engeljohn with the Food Safety and Inspection Service. I don't have those numbers that I can share with you. I'm just not familiar enough with that information. I can tell you that the recall has gone very well. There is no product moving forward. Beginning today the agency intends to begin posting information updates about the recall on to our webpage, so that would be the place where I would direct you to find additional information. The webpage in case you don't have it, is www.usda.gov.

DR. DEHAVEN: Next we'll take two question in the room here. Yes, sir--gentleman in the blue blazer--black?

BILL TOMSON: My name is Bill Tomson with Oster Dow Jones.

This question is for Dr. Sundlof. Have there been any recent changes to the U.S. announced feed ban? The Secretary's announced some changes, but have there been any changes there? And you said compliance here in the US is about 100 percent now. But what was that back about six years ago and the possibility that the feed was contaminated here and not Canada?

DR. SUNDLOF: Oh, okay. Well, let me see if I remember your question. The compliance rate is currently about 99.9 percent. All this information, by the way, is on the FDA website, and we actually post the results of all of our inspections on the website. So people can go there and look at it directly.

Back six years ago, let's go back to August 1997. August 1997 is when the feed ban actually went into effect, so prior to that the issue of compliance is not rational because there was no regulation for them to follow prior to 1997.

Shortly after 1997 we started our inspection, or after August 1997 we started our inspections with the intent to get to all of the facilities, first of all identify all the facilities, that handle ruminant meat and bonemeal and make sure that they were in compliance.

On our initial sweep through the industry, that is, the first sweep through it, most of these establishments had never been regulated before, never saw FDA regulations, and all of

a sudden found themselves under regulation. The compliance rate was somewhere between 75 and 78 percent of all firms were in compliance.

Again, that has dramatically increased as we've continued our annual inspections. All firms are inspected once a year. That includes renderers, feed mills, haulers, anybody that basically touches this material except down to the actual feeding level, and we don't have 100 percent penetration in that area.

There are no changes to the feed rule at this point. Obviously we're talking within the agency about any potential firming up of the rule if that is necessary, but those are still in the discussion phase.

DR. DEHAVEN: The gentleman in the glasses and the blue and white striped shirt.

PHIL BRASHER: Phil Brasher with the Des Moines Register.

In terms of the surveillance of going forward, are you considering any kind of compensation or financial incentives to veterinarians or producers to provide an incentive to have these animals tested-- which as I understand, that Britain has done in the past but it's not continuing to do it. And also, could you clarify how you treat animals that arrive--cattle that arrive downed because I guess of an injury on the truck or something? Are they, are they banned as well?

DR. DEHAVEN: I'll take the first question and let Dr. Engeljohn from FSIS take the second one. I'm assuming that you're talking about animals that would arrive at the slaughter plant downed, but presumably become nonambulatory en route.

In terms of incentive for testing, right now all options are on the table in terms of as we try and refocus or modify our emphasis, from slaughter plants to rendering plants and other points of concentration, how we're going to have continued access to what we think is the highest risk and therefore the most important animals for testing.

While clearly since we are just a couple of days post- the announcement by the Secretary that we were making this shift in terms of not allowing nonambulatory animals to be slaughtered, we are early in the process of developing plans on how we're going to continue to have access to that population at other points.

I would simply say that providing some financial incentive for bringing those animals to those other locations is one of the many things that are being considered at this point. Whether those monies would be made available or not and, if so, at what level, are all the kinds of things that are being considered at this point.

What we do know is that we want to, and the Secretary has said, we want to continue to test at the same level that we anticipated testing before this change, and that would be in the neighborhood of 38,000 samples total. And we think that, again, these nonambulatory animals are the most appropriate population to target with that testing.

And did you want to talk about the cattle that arrive?

DR. ENGELJOHN: Yes. Beginning Tuesday after the Secretary's announcement about the-- no longer allowing nonambulatory disabled animals from entering the slaughter

facilities, once a transport vehicle arrives with beef--cattle--to a facility, FSIS then will make a determination about whether or not the animal is in fact nonambulatory disabled. If so, then the inspectors there will condemn that animal and ensure that it's humanely handled until it is in fact euthanized by the establishment. And then it would be denatured and then ensured that it would go off to appropriate denaturing.

DR. DEHAVEN: We would either at that point, or at some other facility where that carcass might go on to, continue to test those animals as well. So those that do show up at slaughter and become nonambulatory, they are still targeted population for testing.

Operator, let's go to the next question from the audio bridge.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Jason Marcathoff (sp). Please state your company name.

JASON MARCATHOFF: The Edmonton Journal.

The deadline for comment on the proposed rule for Canadian live cattle closes on the next business day, possibly before the DNA results are going to be coming in. You've hinted before this, perhaps you can tell us, will the USDA give the public more time to comment on this rule?

DR. DEHAVEN: In fact the comment period does close on January 5. It has been open since November 4. I believe that's the correct date. And as you point out, this recent situation has shed a new light on the whole situation. There are several options that would be under consideration--or I should say are under consideration--within the Department right now as it relates to that rule. And that could be anything from taking into account, on our own, this situation as well as the comments we receive and proceed from there to reopen the comment period at a later time to repropose an entirely new rule, to keep--stay with the same proposed rule and extend the existing comment period. All of those are options that are currently on the table.

I think one thing would be for certain is that we would not make any determination in terms of a final rule without giving all due consideration to the new situation coming to light because of the find of this positive cow in the state of Washington.

So how we go about that in terms of considering our epidemiological investigation and the results of that internally or providing an opportunity for further public comment is something that is yet to be determined.

Next question, Operator, please?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Mike McGinnis. Please state your company name.

MIKE MCGINNIS: DTN, Data Transmission Network.

And my question this morning has to do with what cattle, if any, are being killed in the state of Washington at this time.

DR. DEHAVEN: I assume you are referring to cattle that might be sacrificed as a result of our epidemiological investigation.

MIKE MCGINNIS: Right.

DR. DEHAVEN: We haven't sacrificed any at this point. We do have hold orders, as I mentioned, on three premises. We do have a group of calves on a separate facility from the indexed herd that would include the male calf, the bull calf, born to this positive cow. So we are making, will be making in the very near future a determination on the disposition of all of those animals that are part of that herd. And I think it's safe to presume that at some point that some or all of those animals will need to be sacrificed.

So we have not yet made that determination. There's a lot of arrangements, obviously, that need to be made in terms of how, when, and where they might be euthanized and appropriate disposal of them. So nothing has happened at this point.

Same with the indexed herd. We have not made a determination in terms of needing to sacrifice any of those animals on the indexed herd. That's clearly a possibility, but no determination has been made at this point.

Next question from the audio bridge, Operator?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Jeff Sparshott. Please state your company name.

JEFF SPARSHOTT: Washington Times.

Could you just tell us a little bit about what's going into the thought process and whether or not you're going to sacrifice these animals, and what you're kind of waiting for. And just a really quick question, when did you actually put a quarantine on the Mattawa herd?

DR. DEHAVEN: In terms of the quarantine on the Mattawa herd, that has been imposed--I don't know exactly the time, but certainly within the last day or two that hold order has been put in place. And I believe it was two days ago that that was imposed.

In terms of our thought process, it goes to the science as well as the public perception. The science would suggest that only those animals that have a direct link back to the premises of origin and would be birth cohorts of the infected cow represent any kind of risk at all, as well as the progeny from the infected cow, whether they be in Canada or the United States. There's certainly some evidence now to suggest that she had calves on both sides of the border.

By international standards, not being able to definitively rule out that the disease can't be transmitted from dam to offspring--recognizing that that is albeit a very slim one, a possibility--international standards would dictate that those animals have to be sacrificed.

Then the second population of biggest concern would be, as I mentioned, the birth cohorts, those animals that would have been on the birth farm at about the same time as the indexed cow and therefore might have been exposed to the same feed source.

Having said that, it would be disingenuous if I were not to suggest that there is also some public perception concerns with other animals that might have been associated with those animals that would be of concern from a scientific or disease transmission standpoint--and recognizing that the producer has some issues and concerns relative to that.

So even though we know with a very good degree of certainty that there's no direct disease spread animal-to-animal by contact simply by being on the same farm, there are some public perception issues related to those animals, and certainly the owners of those animals have some concerns in that regard. So again, no determination having been made, but we are not immune to recognizing that there are some public perception issues beyond those from a pure scientific or disease transmission standpoint as well.

Next question from the audio bridge, and then they'll take the next one in here.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from Jim Polson. Please state your company name.

JIM POLSON: Bloomberg News. Hello?

OPERATOR: Your line is open, sir.

JIM POLSON: Yes. I wondered if the Department has decided yet or has a count yet on how much of the cattle slaughtered would be excluded under the over-30-months rule? In other words, how many cattle would be involved in that exclusion of certain tissue parts?

DR. DEHAVEN: I think the questioning is, what percentage of cattle slaughter is animals over 30 months of age?

JIM POLSON: Yes.

DR. ENGELJOHN: We estimate that roughly 20 percent of the annual slaughter production is in fact cattle 30 months of age or older. I think there's roughly 36 million or so cattle slaughtered.

DR. DEHAVEN: Okay. We'll take the next question in the room. Randy?

RANDY FABI: Randy Fabi with Reuters.

Is the USDA investigating an Edmonton rendering plant as a possible source of the infected feed in the Washington mad cow case? And are there any leads that the USDA is looking into that are connecting to the two mad cow cases?

DR. DEHAVEN: I mentioned that we have USDA epidemiologists in Canada. In fact, one is in Edmonton. The other initially went to Edmonton and is now in their emergency operation center in Ottawa. So we have direct link with the Canadian side of the investigation just as from early on we've had two Canadian epidemiologists working with us in the state of Washington.

And I understand the third one will be joining us in our emergency operation center in Riverdale, Maryland. So there is that cross-fertilization of personnel as we help each other with the investigation on both sides of the border. And then of course our respective people would be sources of information.

But suffice it to say that those investigation activities that are happening on the Canadian side of the border are being directed by the Canadians. Those activities occurring on the U.S. side of the border are being directed by our officials. So while we are involved in the investigation, as it relates to potential sources of feed, that portion of the investigation is being led and directed by Canadian Food Inspection Agency personnel. There have been multiple media reports about a possible link between feed sources for both of these cows, both of them being the Canadian-born animal that was found on or about May 20 and then this more recent find in the state of Washington. But I think it's way too premature to draw any conclusions about whether or not there is a single feed plant or whether or not even if there is, there would have been similar sources of feed--given that each production lot of feed would potentially come from entirely different sources.

So those are all kinds of things that are currently part of the investigation that are occurring in Canada but too early to draw from my conversations with Brian Evans, the chief veterinary officer there, too early to draw any definitive conclusions about feed sources.

Steve, do you have anything to add?

DR. SUNDLOF: No, I think you've covered it.

LYNNE ADRINE: Lynne Adrine with ABC News.

For Dr. Engeljohn, I'm a little confused about your answer about the downed cattle, the cattle that arrive at the processing plant downed under the new guidelines. It sounds as though there's a lot of wiggle-room by inspectors to decide whether animals come under the new downed procedures or whether or not they determine that they were just injured in transit. So is it an absolute about downed animals not being able to get into the food chain, or are there exceptions?

DR. ENGELJOHN: When the Secretary made her announcement on Tuesday she did use the term "downer animal." The term that we're using now is "nonambulatory disabled." That's a broader term than "downer" in and of itself, and it includes those animals that cannot rise from a recumbent position. Those would be the true downers. And then it includes as well those animals that are disabled that cannot walk.

So any animal that cannot walk or is down, cannot rise, is in fact included within the nonambulatory definition. So it's fairly straightforward, very clear. Those animals will not enter the federal establishments, the state establishments, or go into the human food supply.

DR. DEHAVEN: In the interest of being fair in the number of folks we do have on the telephone bridge, we'll go to the telephone bridge for the next two questions, please.

OPERATOR: The next question comes from Denise Grady. Please state your company name.

DENISE GRADY: The New York Times.

Could you tell us if you know the ages of any of the other animals in the group of 80 or 81 that you're still--or 70 left that you're still tracking? And do you know the age of the cow that you say you've located in Mattawa, or any of the others that are still on the farm in Mabton? Thank you.

DR. DEHAVEN: I'm sure that there are records which I have not personally seen which would include the health certificate on which those animals moved that would include a description of the animals as well as their approximate age. And it was, that was part of the information that helped us to conclude that the indexed cow was in fact probably 6 1/2 years old at the time that she was slaughtered in the United States.

So do we do have some of that age information. We know that since they moved on September 4, 2001, that all of them are at least two years old, going on 2 1/2 years old. But I don't have at my fingertips the information in terms of the ages of the other animals.

Since they came from what was, or I should say our information, assuming that is the birth herd which again is not absolutely confirmed at this point--but if we assume that to be the herd of origin, the herd in Alberta, Canada, we do know that it was a dispersal sale--meaning that all of the animals on the farm were sold out at the same time.

So that would suggest the likelihood that the animals would be of a variety of ages at that time, since it was a sale of all of the animals on the farm.

Next question, please?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Tom Steever. Please state your company name.

TOM STEEVER: Brownfield Network.

And I was wondering, how are we going to keep downers in surveillance if now the rule has changed about downer livestock? How will they be kept in surveillance, and what will be known about their disposition?

DR. DEHAVEN: As I mentioned earlier, now that those animals—or, the preponderance of nonambulatory animals--will not be going to slaughter, our efforts right now are focused on modifying our surveillance systems so that we still have access to that population of animals.

Clearly we think that nonambulatory animals, particularly the older nonambulatory animals, are the population at highest risk and therefore the group that we want to continue to focus our surveillance on.

We would assume then at this point if they're not going to be going to slaughter, or the preponderance of them will not be going to slaughter establishments, that we have to have access to them elsewhere. Those other access points could be ‘three-D' plants; those would be plants that process carcasses but not for human consumption. Those

would be rendering plants. And we also need to work to get access to some of those animals on the farm.

We think the most likely route there is working through the American Veterinary Medical Association and the local practitioner who has established that relationship with the dairy farmer. So we will be refocusing our effort to have access to those same animals--but before they would be going to slaughter. We will now try and get access to them at those concentration points or on the farm, those same animals, now that they won't be going to slaughter.

MR. CURLETT: Sir, I think we have time for two more on the audio bridge, and then we will finish up with two more here.

DR. DEHAVEN: So four more questions. Next one from the audio bridge, please?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Carol Sugarman. Please state your company name.

CAROL SUGARMAN: Yes. This is Carol Sugarman from Food Chemical News.

I was wondering, is it the Canadian government that's doing the DNA testing as the U.S. government is? And are there any independent labs doing confirmatory testing in either the U.S. or Canada?

DR. DEHAVEN: It's my understanding that on the Canadian side they are using a private contract laboratory. This would be a private laboratory but one that's operating under contract with the Canadian food inspection agency or at least the Canadian government.

So while it's contract, they certainly have a lot of expertise, and indeed this is the same laboratory, based on my understanding, that did all the DNA testing to confirm the birth herd of the cow that was found in Canada to be positive on May 20. So, a private contract laboratory in Canada.

And I'm sorry--the second part of your question?

CAROL SUGARMAN: Was, are there any independent labs that are not owned--are there any independent labs doing confirmatory testing in either the U.S. or Canada?

DR. DEHAVEN: Well, in fact, it only takes one laboratory, so we've got some redundancy in that we have one lab in Canada and one in the U.S. doing this testing. So those are the only two laboratories that are receiving these samples. The Canadian contract laboratory and then our agricultural research laboratory in Nebraska is the laboratory on the U.S. side.

Last question from the telephone bridge, please?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Jim Polson. Please state your company name.

JIM POLSON: Bloomberg News.

Dr. Sundlof, I wondered if you could be a little bit more specific about--since you say that the rendering plants are examined once a year, whether this means that inspections will need to be picked up?

DR. SUNDLOF: Well, again, we are considering all of the new information in trying to make a determination as to what the most appropriate response is. But that coverage--once-a-year coverage--seems to be a pretty good frequency. We think that that, right now that has been adequate.

When we find a violation--when we find a firm in violation, then it gets reinspected on a first come basis. And so the minimum is once a year. Companies are inspected more frequently if it turns out that they are not in compliance with the rule.

Again, we are considering all of the new information in trying to make sure that this system, this firewall that we have in place, is as strong as possible. And we'll again examine the frequency and determine if we consider that to still be adequate. But at this point in time my sense is that once a year, plus revisiting the firms in violation, has served us very well in the past and will serve us in the future.

DR. DEHAVEN: Gentleman in the brown blazer?

MARC KAUFMAN: Mark Kaufman with The Washington Post.

At this point, is there any firm reason to believe that the food--that the contaminated feed was consumed by the cow in Canada or in the United States? And also, is there anything that's being done now to trace back where the food came from--for the animal--once it came to the US?

DR. DEHAVEN: Based on what we know about the disease, the fact that these feed supplements are typically fed to dairy cattle early in life and, second, the fact that we have a three to five-year--or longer--incubation period, that would strongly suggest that the contaminated feed was not fed to the animal at its present location--or I should say the indexed herd where it was immediately before going to slaughter.

Our primary line of inquiry does indeed take us back to a farm in Alberta, Canada, and if in fact that is correct and if we're able to confirm that, and other than the time in transit this animal has only been at the two locations, that would suggest that the contaminated feed would have been fed at that farm in Alberta, Canada.

Again, that is presuming that the herd in Alberta is in fact the birth herd, and we're able to confirm that.

So without question, one of the primary focuses of the investigation on the Canadian side of the border is based on the assumption that that is the birth herd, and then looking at what feed might have been consumed by animals on the farm at that time when this animal was a calf.

All right, last question in the room?

MARK SHERMAN: Thank you. Mark Sherman with the Associated Press.

On the subject of mother to cow transmission, mother to cow transmission, however unlikely, I would assume that the positive cow's mother is long dead, but what about its progeny? Are you searching at all for, for those animals?

DR. DEHAVEN: In fact, it's a very good question. We are tracing the dam or the mother of the positive cow. It's possible--and again we are attempting to verify through records--but it's possible that she could in fact have been included in that 81 animals that came into the United States in September of 2001. We don't know that for sure, but there at least is some preliminary information to suggest that.

So we would, as you mentioned--even though it's unlikely that disease is going to be spread maternally, if in fact that was the source of this animal's infection--it would be important to get back to her dam. And that work is in progress.

Before we leave, Dan Engeljohn had a clarification he wanted to make on an earlier statement that he made. Dan?

DR. ENGELJOHN: I perhaps did not fully understand the question that was asked earlier, and so I'm going to try to make a clarification and answer it two ways in terms of how I think that the question was raised.

I think the question related--or I answered the question of how many animals, or how many cattle, come to slaughter that are 30 months of age or older. And I answered that roughly 20 percent of those slaughtered each year are 30 months of age or older. And there are 36 million or so total cattle slaughtered.

However, I think the question may have been more: what would be banned in terms of those animals. And for those animals 30 months of age or older, they still can come to slaughter. It would just be the specified risk materials that would be banned. Okay?

DR. DEHAVEN: All right. We thank you very much for being here again. Happy New Year to everyone, and Ed I'll turn it back to you.

MR. CURLETT: Thank you, sir. Thanks for being on the BSE update today.

The next briefing will occur on Monday, and we'll make a time announcement on the website. For follow-up media calls call 202-720-4623, and transcripts of today's briefing will become available on the website shortly.

So with that, thank you.

(end transcript)